

Introduction: be prepared

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The following six case studies all describe situations where a health sciences library has been asked to permanently give up a considerable amount of space, usually an entire floor of the existing library, to what most would consider nonlibrary functions. The situations at these institutions vary considerably in some ways and have remarkable similarities in others. It is not the purpose of these studies to bemoan the loss of space, but rather to point out that a trend may be developing and that lessons can be learned from libraries that have undergone a loss of space.

The idea that health sciences libraries "as places" will change considerably has been around for a while. In 1992, Kountz proposed that it would make more sense to purchase computers for all users than to continue to run a traditional library. He believed that the future of the library was in providing information at the point of need, not in building huge local collections [1]. Fifteen years ago, at the first National Library of Medicine "Building Symposium," a question posed to all presenters was, "Is there a need for a physical centralized information facility in the academic health sciences center? If so, will there continue to be such a need?" [2]. Today, librarians are often asking themselves these questions. The adoption of electronic journals in place of print suggests that libraries will need less space. Is it any wonder that the administrators of academic health centers are asking the same questions [3]?

In the delphi study conducted by Ludwig and Starr in 2004, 77% of the participants agreed with the statement that "By 2010, the health sciences library will no longer be thought of as primarily a physical place but as an entity that provides access to highly competent information-management professionals" [4]. Yet the physical space remains. Planning groups often suggest new uses for space that relate to the educational mission of the library and the campus. However, practical considerations have outweighed these goals in several cases, with library space

becoming office space. Teaching faculty and many librarians wonder what the physical building is to become other than a study hall with a coffee bar and computer lab [5]?

In the cases that follow, some requests for space came as a surprise to the library. In several cases the speed with which space had to be vacated severely limited the library's ability to plan properly. In other cases, a planning process allowed input from faculty and librarians, provided time for consideration, and generally resulted in an outcome more congruent with the library's mission.

Based on this sample, it seems to be only a matter of when, not if, health sciences libraries will be asked to give up space. Although advance planning and preparation cannot always lead to the outcomes that seem most desirable for the library and the parent institution, these case studies show that, as the Boy Scouts say, it is best to "be prepared."

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